

The effort with online learning was really appreciated but onsite learning is generally preferred – though a substantial proportion also favour blended learning, delivered by teachers who are *au fait* with the techniques of online learning

Short report from a survey of students at the University of the Faroe Islands regarding the experience of impact of COVID-19 restrictions in Spring 2020 and early Autumn 2020 (conducted later autumn 2020)

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Summary: On the whole, the students understand the rationale and measures that were taken during the COVID-19 lockdown in the Spring and the more limited restrictions in Autumn 2020 at the University of the Faroe Islands (UFI). Some students have needed extra support and clarifications, and to a large extent they have been satisfied with the help they got. The students' feedback shows that when considering the teaching methods used during the online teaching, most of them prefer onsite teaching, as they can tend to experience some impact on their motivation, concentration and focus with online learning. Also, the social aspects are highlighted as an important factor for a positive learning environment. On the other hand, the students also see the benefits of online teaching, especially for those that are living far away, and when students are prevented from attending for various reasons. However, before implementing online teaching as a permanent part of the learning environment, technical issues need further attention and teachers must be upskilled for online teaching.

Students well-being: Only one third wake up feeling fresh and rested

To assess the students' well-being, the WHO (Five) Well-Being Index¹ was used as part of the survey. The students were asked to consider the two last weeks, and then answer 5 questions on how often they have been in moods such as happy, calm, active, engaged and rested. The answers show the same trend that has been seen in other studies, that the younger students score less than the older. The overall score for all students was 15.9 (Table 1).

When looking into the results, it is in particular the question "I woke up feeling fresh and rested" which might be an issue, as 23% answered that this was occurring rarely (16%) or never (7%). The responses to this also show that the younger students to a larger degree felt tired when they woke up (27%) compared with groups of older students, 22% and 17% respectively (Table 1). This pattern can be compared with the findings in a survey on public health from 2019², which found that 17% of the respondents (age 18-75+ years) did not sleep sufficiently to feel rested when they woke up, and it was in particular those in the age range from 18-44 years that fell into this group with lack of sleep or low quality sleep (≈25%). The

¹ <https://www.psykiatri-regionh.dk/who-5/Pages/default.aspx>

² <http://www.folkhaelsa.fo/>

survey from 2019 found an increase of 9% from 2015 to 2019 in number of people who did not sleep sufficient well to feel rested when they woke up.

As the numbers from 2020 do not differ so much from the public health survey from 2019, it might be other causes than COVID-19 that explain the relative low score in well-being, such as going too late to bed due to smartphones, computers, television etc., as also mentioned in the report from the survey from 2019.

Table 1: WHO-5 Well-being index score, and one of the questions in more details.

	WHO-5 score	I woke up feeling fresh and rested % of rarely or never
Miðal "WHO-5 Well-being Index" – all students	15,9	23%
"WHO-5 Well-being Index" – 25 years or younger	15,7	27%
"WHO-5 Well-being Index" – 26-40 years	15,9	22%
"WHO-5 Well-being Index" – 41 years or older	16,7	17%

Student support, counselling and guidance

COVID-19 has had an impact on the teaching, assignments and exams for UFI students, and depending on the individual situation they have tried to seek necessary information to be able to navigate through the changed conditions.

Most of the students – 72% -- have not asked for any help, while 12% have been in contact with the student counselling team. In addition, some have tried to find out solutions together with their supervisor, their programme leader, dean, student service, and IT-support. Several students have been in contact with a range of support possibilities.

As a whole the students have been satisfied with the support, with 82% satisfied, 15% neutral and 3% dissatisfied.

The students had the opportunity to clarify what they in particular were satisfied or dissatisfied with, and one of the issues that they are very pleased with, is when the information is clear and consistent, while they are slightly less satisfied when they get different answers from different bodies. Some are asking for clear and transparent procedures and rules. The students have also used the opportunity to give mainly positive feedback regarding incidents that have happened before COVID-19.

Satisfaction with teachers and how they handled the COVID-19 situation

61% of the students were satisfied with how their teachers handled the situation, 12% were dissatisfied, while 16% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and 12% did not know.

The students had an opportunity to respond regarding how their teachers handled the situation, and their answers fall into two groups:

The technical issues with Zoom, where according to the students some teachers managed well and others not so well. Zoom also gives opportunity for different teaching methods, such as lecturing and groupwork, and the ability to structure a lesson on Zoom is mentioned and compared with onsite teaching. Some students pointed out that some teachers needed some training in technical solutions, and some also need better teaching skills, both in general and with distance/online teaching. Also, some students wanted distance teaching to

become a permanent option, to use when prevented to attend onsite. The students pointed to the importance of teacher engagement, and that some teachers are not so interested in teaching online.

The communication and guidelines from the university have in general been well received, although some students pointed out that not all restrictions have made sense, but many students also point out that they think that the teachers have done their very best in a time of uncertainty and could in general not have acted much differently than they did. Some think that the restrictions were relaxed too soon, while a few thought they were too stringent. Information could in some cases have been communicated sooner.

Attitude towards online education (pro and cons)

Most of the students used the opportunity to give their say on the benefits and drawbacks of online education.

Benefits

On the whole, the benefits the students mentioned do not directly relate to teaching as such, but rather to their own comfort, such as less time spent on travelling (33% of the issues mentioned). They also often mentioned issues related to their personal organisation (28%), these issues are such as being able to stay home with the family, no need for packed lunch, easier to organize studies with work, being able to work at the same time as following the teaching.

18% of the issues mentioned are related to the possibilities with distance education, such as that it provides possibilities to attend class when either children or the students themselves are unwell, or otherwise prevented, and recorded lectures are also sought after, both to be able to listen at another time, and also for exam preparation.

10% of the issues mentioned are related to teaching and learning, there are several students that mentioned that the teaching online is more focused and effective, provides other and better possibilities for group work, no disturbance from classmates, and those with anxiety also appreciate the possibility to be able to get distance education.

There is not much focus on COVID-19 when considering the benefits of online education, as only 7% of the factors mentioned are related to health issues and risks, and finally some students have stated, that there are NO benefits from online teaching – these account for 4% of the issues mentioned.

Drawbacks

While teaching was not so prominent in the answers regarding benefits, it was the main focus when the students got the opportunity to mention the drawbacks of distance/online teaching. 55% of the issues mentioned were about teaching and learning, mostly obstacles such as students' lack of motivation, concentration and focus. Also, the teachers' skills with regard to online teaching was often mentioned as an obstacle for quality teaching.

The social interactions between students, and between students and teachers are also mentioned often, as 19% of the issues mentioned are on issues which demonstrate that the students are aware of the importance the social interactions have for their learning. They often mention that the discussions are not as smooth online as when they are onsite, and the more

informal discussions in the breaks are also important for the learning environment. And they miss each other.

Many of the same personal organisation issues that they mentioned as benefits are also mentioned as drawbacks with regard to their teaching and learning, because staying home with children is not advantageous for the studies, as some of them mention. Others mentioned the lack of structure, as the home office is not considered as serious as attending the onsite facilities. 13% of the respondents' mentioned issues belonged to this category.

Technical issues accounted for 10% of the mentioned drawback issues, and here it was both internet connections that were insufficient, the technical equipment used at the University, and the abilities to use the technique that were mentioned.

The only issues that did not fit into these categories were a few answers that mentioned that there were either no drawbacks, or that the whole thing with online teaching was a drawback.

Prior experiences with distance/online education and attitude to future use

19% of the students had prior experiences with distance/online education from other institutions than UFI. Those that had experiences had tried it at various sites, the largest group, 24 students, had experiences from studies abroad.

On the other hand, 78% of the respondents had tried distance/online education during the COVID-19 period, and when assessing the impact of these experiences on the students' attitude towards using distance/online education in the future, it turned out that 39% were more positive for using online education in the future, 25% were neutral, while 36% were more negative for using online education in the future.

Experiences with distance education at the UFI

Zoom was the main platform for online education together with Moodle. While most students (96%) have been using Zoom, not all have been using the option of breakout rooms within Zoom (56% have not used it). These breakout rooms are a way of solving the problem with discussion groups and group work, which many students have asked for.

The survey indicates that there is room for improvement here. When the students are asked about how much they have learned by using distance education, only 29% say they have learned the same as if they were onsite, and only 18% say that the presentations have been as good or better than when they are onsite. Looking after the students behaviour might give a clue to the lack of interaction during the online education, because 65% of them say that their teacher has allowed them to participate without turning their video on.

Around one third of the students have a positive experience with online groupwork, and by comparing students' satisfaction with groupwork with whether they had used breakout room, it turns out that those that used breakout rooms are considerably more satisfied with groupwork than those that didn't use breakout rooms ($p < 0.001$).

Satisfaction with the solutions of the University of the Faroe Islands

62% of the students were satisfied with the digital solutions that were used in their courses during the COVID-19 period, while 16% were dissatisfied and 23% neither.

58% of the students agreed that their teachers had managed to create a good quality online teaching during the COVID-19 period, 19% disagreed, while 23% were neutral on this issue.

81% of the students think that UFI has handled the circumstances around COVID-19 well, 7% think UFI has handled the circumstances badly, while 12% are neutral.

Final words from the students (examples from different faculties):

- IF online teaching will be an integrated part of the University, it is very important that the teachers are taught how to teach online before it is implemented, because online and onsite teaching are completely different things.
- As with everything new, online education was not perfect from the beginning, but I think it was much better than nothing. This can be improved with time, and become a good tool for people not living in Tórshavn, but I do not think it can replace standard teaching.
- Send people on a computer course.
- My teachers have managed to provide a good quality online teaching, yes. But that does not mean that all subjects are equally well suited for online teaching.
- I do not feel that the period with COVID-19 has affected me in any particular way. I take this as an indication that the teachers have managed to adapt the teaching to the changed circumstances.
- The teachers are not so happy that it is happening online. It is annoying because it gives students better opportunity to take courses, also if they live far away from Tórshavn.

Method and overall background answers: Online questionnaire (QuestionPro) distributed after a period in august-september 2020 with restricted onsite teaching, and hence a considerable share of the required teaching was conducted online for most, but not all of the students. The questionnaire contained mostly Lickert scale questions, but there were also some open questions. Statistics were done in SPSS 26. The restricted teaching in autumn 2020 was not as extensive as when there was a complete lock-down in the spring. The teachers were asked to get the students to respond to the questionnaire during the lecturing time, to increase the response rate. In total 409 students responded, which is 59% of the students that were possible to reach using this approach. 67% of the respondents were female, 40% started their studies in 2020 (some of these will have experienced online learning at the upper secondary schools), 37% were 25 years or younger, and 86% of the respondents were enrolled into a bachelor programme. 56% of the respondents had no children, and 73% had a paid job. 30% had one hour or more to travel to the University, while 43% had less than 15 minutes. Full results are available on request, subject to GDPR compliance.